

Kumari or 'virgin' worship in Kathmandu valley*

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Kumari is a goddess who has been a recognized member of the Hindu pantheon for at least 2,500 years. Throughout the long history of her worship she has displayed qualities of a highly ambiguous¹ kind: on the one hand, she is literally by name 'virgin' or 'chaste young girl'; on the other, she is classed as one of a group of mother goddesses who are also the sexual partners of leading male deities. For example, in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, a third or fourth century B. C. text, Rudra's spouse Ambika is addressed as Kanyakumari (Muir 1873, IV: 426-27 and Chattopadhyaya 1970: 153-55). *Ambika* literally means 'little mother' while *kanya* and *kumari* are both words that are used to refer to young unmarried girls. *Kanya* most commonly occurs in the phrase *kanyadana* (giving a girl in marriage), and hence necessarily refers to pre-menstrual, and for high-caste Hindus, young girls. Kumari is translated by Monier-Williams (1899: 292) as 'a young girl, one from ten to twelve years old, maiden, daughter; or [in the Tantras] any virgin up to the age of sixteen or before menstruation has commenced'.² In the *Mahabharata* and other early texts Kumari

*The research on which this paper is based was carried out in Kathmandu valley in 1973-74. I am grateful to Sydney University, the Australian Research Grants Committee, the Myer Foundation, and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia for having financed the fieldwork. I am also much indebted to the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University for having assisted my research in many ways.

¹O'Flaherty (1973) has provided a most scholarly analysis of the pervasive interplay that occurs between asceticism and eroticism in the mythology of Siva. Leach (1962) has demonstrated a similar ambiguity in the qualities attributed to Ganesa, the elephant-headed son of Siva, who is also Kumaris' half-brother.

²Sir Monier-Williams also noted that Kumari is the female form of *kumara* 'a child, boy, youth, son, [Rg Veda; Atharva Veda]; a prince, heir-apparent associated in the kingdom with the reigning monarch [especially in theatrical language]'. Just as

is listed as one of the many epithets of Durga, the beautiful and mature destroyer of male demons (Sorenson 1904: 434). But by far her most common appearance is as Kumari, one of a set of seven or eight 'mothers' (*mairka*) who are the personified energies or consorts (*sakti*) of prominent gods.

Despite her antiquity and her literary prominence Kumari has, at least within India, remained a relatively minor member of the pantheon. The only temples that I know of specifically dedicated to her are those of Kanyakumari at Cape Comorin in the south,³ and Kanya Devi in the Kangra valley in the north-east Punjab.⁴ Her worship, however, was and still is, of greater importance than the paucity of her shrines might suggest. In many parts of India, but most especially in Bengal and in the Punjab, *kumari-puja* acquired much popularity amongst the followers of the Tantra. In this ritual the aim is not so much to worship a goddess called Kumari as to utilize the power of young living virgins in order to invoke the spirit of the far from virginal Sakti, Durga or Kali. Little has been recorded of this most interesting ritual,⁵ though it seems likely that the

Kumari is an epithet of Sakti or Durga so is Kumara identified with Skanda or Kartikeya. Skanda, 'the spurt of semen', is called Kumara because he remains forever young and single—he is the eternal and beautiful bachelor to whom young Newar girls are married in the *ihī* ceremony. Like Kumari, he is dressed in red and rides on a peacock. The ambiguous nature of both deities is apparent in the common appearance of Skanda (or Kumara) as the male consort of Kumari in the various lists of the Sapta or Asta Matrka. Together, they combat demons with the power of youth.

³A Greek sea captain noted in about 60 A.D. that 'Beyond this there is another place called Comari, at which are the Cape of Comari and a harbour; hither come those men who wish to consecrate themselves for the rest of their lives, and bathe and dwell in celibacy; and women also do the same; for it is told that a goddess once dwelt here and bathed' (Schoff 1912: 46). About 70 years later the geographer Ptolemy referred to the Cape as 'Comoria Akron'. Yule (1903: 382-83), writing in 1871, noted that 'the monthly bathing in her honour... is still continued, though now the pilgrims are few'. He also noted that at the beginning of the Portuguese era in India, there was a small kingdom in this area called Comari. Morris (1968: 194) noted that 'there, a little outside the town (Cape Comorin), is a temple of great antiquity dedicated to Kumari, the virginal aspect of Durga'. He also recorded that it has a Brahmin *pujari*, but is no longer an important place of pilgrimage.

⁴Rose (1919, i: 320) noted that at Lagpata in the Kangra valley there is 'a temple to Kaniya Devi the virgin goddess, whose fair is held on 9th Har. Her Brahmin *pujari* is a Bhojki and *bhog* is only offered and a lamp lit in the evening'.

⁵Bharati (1965: 160, fn 95) provided a brief description: '*Kumari-Puja*: a lovely and impressive ceremony current all over Bengal and in other parts of India, though with lesser frequency; a girl of twelve, of a Brahmin family, is installed on the *pitha* like an image of Sakti, and is worshipped accordingly after the *pratistha* or installation ceremony; in this particular *puja*, the virgin represents the goddess Sarasvati. How-

normal procedure was to regard the girls as living goddesses solely for the duration of the *puja*.

Rose (1919: i) made a number of references to the worship of young unmarried girls as Devi in the Kangra valley. Thus 'Devi is personified in a girl under ten years of age twice a year and offerings are made to her as if to the goddess on these occasions' (i, 327). 'The worship of Devi is always cropping up. Some years ago some enterprising people of the Kapurthala state got two or three young unmarried girls and gave out that they had the power of Devi. The ignorant accepted this belief and worshipped them as goddesses. They visited various parts of the Jullundur District and were looked up to with great reverence everywhere, but as good results did not follow, the worship died out' (i, 329).

In Kathmandu Valley the Newars have developed a unique cult in which two- to three-year-old girls are formally installed in office as living Kumaris and then regularly worshipped as such until certain disqualifying signs appear—usually some six or seven years later. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how even in this cult of quite explicitly virginal girls the basic ambiguity is still apparent. Though out of office as soon as they menstruate, they are nevertheless worshipped as living forms of such mature goddesses as Taleju Bhavani, Durga, Kali and even the Buddhist Vajradevi; though in theory disqualified as soon as they lose a milk tooth they are also said to possess a full set of adult teeth; though pure deities who should not have animal sacrifices made to them, they are also fearsome goddesses who thrive on the hot blood of dying buffalo and goat. I will argue that the ambiguous nature of the goddess, both in Nepal and India is paralleled by a similar ambiguity in the Hindu conception of the female role. In a society in which status is explicitly defined in terms of relative purity, high value has inevitably been accorded to the young girl as yet unsullied by blood, sex or childbirth. In orthodox Brahminical terms the virgin, especially if she is also pre-menstrual, is in a state of great natural

ever, most Brahmins regard the presentation of their daughter for this ceremony as inauspicious (*akusala*).'

Macdonald (1903: 41-42) made the following more detailed statement: 'The Kumari puja is well known in Calcutta. A house holder, intent on thus worshipping the Sakti, gets [from outside the membership of his own house] a girl, sets her up as a goddess on a small board or platform surrounded with nine or twelve other females [men not excluded], places a plate under one of her feet, and to that foot makes the usual offerings of flowers, water, etc. A Brahmin gentleman who has himself been present at one or more of these Kumari Pujas, tells me that in Calcutta they are not uncommon.' For additional references to *kumaripuja* see Abbott (1932: 63) and Chakravarti (1963: 81).

purity. It is for this reason that a living virgin is thought to constitute not only the perfect bride, but also an appropriate vessel or container for the spirit of a goddess. But other than in these two contexts virginity is not highly esteemed amongst Hindus. On the contrary, virgins are believed to be unable to obtain either spiritual enlightenment in this world or to reach the abode of the gods in the next (Walker 1968, ii: 571). It is only as her husband's sexual partner and mother of his sons that a woman is capable of fulfilling her *dharma*.

Mary Douglas has convincingly argued that 'when the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers—such as witchcraft and evil eye' (1966: 99). That such powers have for long been attributed to Indian virgins is evident in the following statement of Walker (1968 ii: 571-72):

There seems to be an almost universal belief in ancient and medieval India in the perils attending the condition of virginity, and particularly in the dangers of initiatory intercourse with a girl. Hymenal blood was considered extremely potent and its touch brought contamination. The shedding of blood, reprehensible at all times, became more so in the case of virgin blood. A man is particularly prone to its injury because the excitement of the sexual act finds him defenceless against the psychic dangers inherent in all contact with virgins. It was believed that a woman untouched by the male rod was liable on defloration to flash forth a devastating aura that would bring ruin to a man, blight to his cattle, and desolation to his home.

The followers of the Tantra seek to gain control of powers such as these in the performance of *kumaripuja*; in the case of the right-handed practitioners by the use of conventional ritual procedures, and of the left-handed by either symbolic or real sexual intercourse. In other words, the virgin, who in other contexts is a threat to men and to their activities, is here used to positive effect in furthering their spiritual aspirations. The benefits that flow from the Tantric performance of *kumaripuja* are vividly described in the *Yogini Tantra*.

Those gods ever desire a Brahman, a virgin, Sakti, fire, Sruti and a cow for worship on their sacrificial grounds. If one virgin be worshipped, it will be a second *pūja*. The fruit of virgin worship cannot be told by me. All this [universe] movable and immovable belongs to Kumari [virgin] and Sakti. If one young damsel be worshipped, seen only in spirit, then

actually all the high goddesses will be worshipped without doubt. . . in time, by Kumari-worship, the worshipper attains Sivahood. Where Kumari is worshipped, that country purifies the earth; the places all round for five crores will be most holy. There one should do Kumari Puja; there breaks forth great light manifest in the land of Bharata [India] (Macdonald 1902: 41-42).

Yet despite such awesome powers all males of clean caste both were and still are required to face them when they confront their young virgin brides after marriage. For most, the wedding rites provide a sole and sufficient protection. But in some cases special precautions are taken to ensure that the husband does not himself face the dangers. In many parts of India the mother or some other close female relative ensures that the hymen is broken prior to marriage. Chakraberty (1945: 111, 325), for example, recorded that 'the hymen of Hindu girls is generally torn in their early girlhood by the forefinger of their mother in daily washing the vulva with water'. Walker (1968, ii: 572) has noted the use of such ritually powerful males as Kings and priests for the defloration of virgins. But perhaps of greatest interest is the widespread occurrence of the mock-marriage of virgin girls to gods, Brahmins, trees, swords, snakes and other erotic and phallic objects. By far the most famous of these is the *tali* tying ceremony of the Nayers of Kerala. Gough (1955: 71-74) has argued that amongst these people, and indeed most probably throughout India, the power of the virgin derives from her association with a powerful and castrating mother figure. The mock-marriage is, she argued, performed to take the awesome mother out of the virgin so that ordinary men can safely copulate with her. In support of her argument she noted that during the rites the girls are brought into close association with Bhagavadi, the fearsome mother goddess who is also a pure virgin. As mother, Bhagavadi is Devi and hence equated with Durga, Kali and Bhadrakali, the fierce consorts of Siva who destroy male demons. As virgin goddess she is worshipped as Kanyakumari, the famous deity at Cape Comorin. Furthermore, the dead Nayar virgin can herself become a form of Bhagavadi to whom a shrine must be erected.

Gough provided an orthodox Freudian explanation for the equation of virgin with mother by arguing that it is a product of unconscious incestuous desires. She wrote (1955:71): 'The virgin, then, in these castes is sacred: it is ritually dangerous to take her virginity. My hypothesis is that this is so because the virgin is unconsciously associated with the mother, as a woman whom it is desirable to approach sexually but who may not

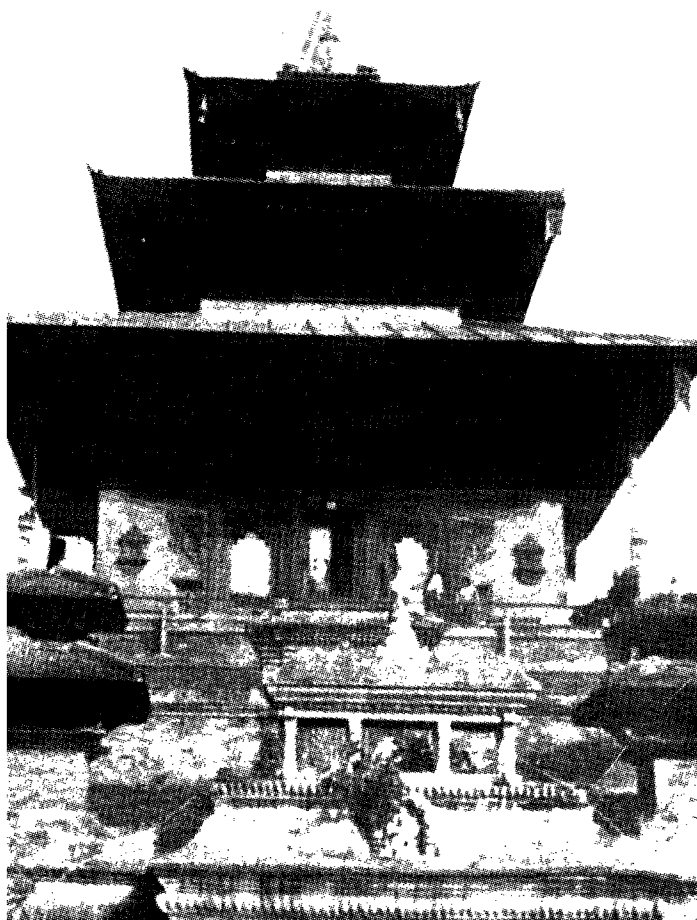
be approached, because of the threat of castration or murder by a male parental figure'.

Gough's remarkable hypothesis has met with little favour. Yalman (1963:38), for example, rejected it on the grounds that 'the Oedipus Complex, as described by psycho-analysts, appears as a universal phenomenon and, therefore, loses its force in the "explanation" of local and particular ceremonies'. Surely the answer to this common anthropological criticism is that though the Oedipus Complex may well be universal it does not necessarily follow that it is of equal importance in all cultures. If it should contribute to the meaning of 'local ceremonies' then it may be that in such cultures the complex is of unusual strength. I do not, however, wish to defend Gough's claim that the complex is indeed well-developed amongst the Nayars—her evidence, though suggestive, is far from conclusive. My aim is, rather, to confirm her empirical finding that amongst the Nayars, and most probably throughout the Hindu world, the virgin goddess is infused with the spirit of a sword-wielding, blood-lusting and sexually desirable destroyer of male demons. Regardless of whether or not this fusion of female roles may be understood in Freudian terms, it seems highly likely that the *tali* tying and similar mock-marriages are performed in order to neutralize the dangerous power within the virgin. I find it a remarkable vindication of Gough's functional argument that the Newars of Kathmandu, a people who have clearly demonstrated their concern with virginity by developing a major cult of living goddesses, also attach great ritual significance to the mock-marriage of virgins and to the strict seclusion of girls at or just prior to their first menstruation. I will conclude the paper with a brief analysis of both ceremonies.

THE NEWARS

The Newars are a Tibeto-Burman speaking people who up to the Gorkha conquest of 1768 constituted the great majority of the population of Kathmandu valley. Today they account for approximately 50 per cent of a total population of just over half a million. They are the proud inheritors of an ancient urban civilization, and even now both Patan and Bhadgaon are almost 100 per cent Newar cities.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism have ancient roots in Kathmandu valley. Hinduism, as in India, has a history that eventually merges into pre-history, while Buddhism most probably appeared not long after its origin in south Nepal in the fifth century B.C. The relative popularity of the two religions has varied from time to time, largely in accordance with changes in royal patronage (Allen 1973: 1-14). Orthodox monastic Buddhism was



Taleju temple, Kathmandu

The royal Kumari of Kathmandu being lifted onto her chariot (*ratha*) for her annual festival, September 1974





The Patan Kumari sitting on her throne in Hawbaha to receive worshippers on the ninth night (*mahanavami*) of Dasain in October 1974



The Ekanta Kumari of Bhadgaon during Dasain in October 1974

the dominant form for a long period extending almost from the time of the Buddha up to about the tenth or eleventh century, when it began to give way to the growing popularity of Tantricism. In Hinduism this means the growth of cults such as Saktism and Saivism, while in Buddhism Vajrayana practices led to the collapse of the monasteries. Some commentators have interpreted this period as constituting the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism—but a more accurate view must surely be that in both religions there was a switch from the pure, ascetic renunciatory pole to the greater ritualism and sensuality found both in Tantrayana and Vajrayana. It is true, however, that from about the early fourteenth century up to the present day, a succession of high-caste Hindu kings contributed to a steady decline in the strength and popularity of Buddhism. Today, the relative popularity of the two religions varies not only from city to city, but also from caste to caste and even individual to individual. Furthermore, as a number of previous observers have noted, the relationship between the two religions is one of synthesis rather than division and opposition. Though individuals and to a lesser extent castes may be classed as either Buddhist or Hindu by reference to the kind of priest employed for domestic ceremonies, in other contexts it is either difficult or meaningless to make any distinction. Most Newars attend both Buddhist and Hindu festivals, and many festivals are themselves an intermingling of deities, rituals and priests of both religions. This is most especially apparent in the Kumari cult for here we find a classic Hindu goddess who is not only worshipped by Buddhist priests, but incarnates herself in young girls of pure Buddhist caste.

Though Newars like to refer to a remote period in which their society was without caste, it is today, and has been for many hundreds of years, internally divided into a large number of named hereditary groups, each of which is endogamous, associated with one or more traditional occupations, and hierarchically ranked on the basis of relative purity.

This fundamental structural feature is, as Yalman has persuasively argued, for Ceylon and Malabar, crucial for an understanding of the relationship that obtains between the purity of castes and the purity of women. 'The preoccupation with caste purity narrows and focuses attention on a profound "danger" situation—the appearance of female sexuality' (Yalman 1963: 39). Mock-marriages, child-marriages and the ritual seclusion of girls during first menstruation must all be seen as institutionalized responses to the dangers associated with the end of virginal and premenstrual purity. I will argue that the Newar cult of living virgins is part of the same syndrome,

KUMARI AND TALEJU

There are at present ten Newar girls regularly worshipped as living Kumaris; three (four until recently) in Kathmandu, three in Bhadgaon, two in Patan and one each in Deopatan and Bungamati.⁶ There are major differences according to such variables as the girl's caste membership, who worships her and what attributes of what goddess are most stressed. Though there is a particularly close historical connection between Sakya caste, Taleju as presiding deity and royal patronage, it is not invariant for the ex-royal Kumari of Patan is selected from a Vajracharya community. The other four Vajracharya Kumaris have a more Tantric and Buddhist character than their Sakya counterparts, and are more closely associated with the Vajrayana deity Vajradevi than with the Hindu Taleju or Durga. The two Jyapu Kumaris are worshipped by the Pradhans and Deo-Brahmins, two high-ranking Newar Hindu castes. The full list of eleven is as follows:

Kathmandu

1. The Raj (royal) or Lakhu (palace) Kumari. Sakya caste and worshipped by King and nation.
2. Mu (chief) Kumari. Gubhaju (Vajracharya) caste of Mubaha worshipped mostly by members of her own caste in central (Datu) Kathmandu. This position has been vacant for some years.
3. Kwabaha Kumari. Gubhaju caste of Kwabaha worshipped both by members of her own caste in north (Thane) Kathmandu and by the Pradhans of Bhagawan Baha in Thamel locality.
4. Kilgar Kumari. Jyapu caste and worshipped primarily by the Pradhans of Kilagar-Itumbaha area.

Patan (Lalitpur)

5. The ex-royal Kumari of Hawbaha in Gahbaha locality. Gubhaju caste and worshipped by most Patan residents and also by a number of individuals, not exclusively Newar, from elsewhere.
6. Sonimha Kumari. Jyapu caste of Mikhabaha. Worshipped by Deo-Brahmins of that locality.

⁶See Allen (in press) for further details concerning each local Kumari,

Bhadgaon (Bhaktapur)

7. Ekanta Kumari. She can be chosen from any of the *baha* of Bhadgaon and may be of either Gubhaju or Sakya castes. Her official residence is in Dipankar Baha and in the past she was worshipped by the Malla Kings of Bhadgaon. Today she is publicly worshipped by most of the population of Bhadgaon during Dasain, and is available for private clients on request.

8. Wala Lakhu Kumari. Selection as with Ekanta Kumari but she is especially associated with Wala Lakhu, a *baha*-like courtyard near Dattatreya temple where she has her *agama*. Worshipped only during Dasain.

9. Tebukche Kumari. As with the other Bhadgaon Kumaris she can be selected from any of the Gubhaju or Sakya families. She is worshipped only during Dasain and especially by the Jyapus of Tebuk locality. She is unique in that she must be an unweaned baby and hence replaced annually.

Deopatan

10. Chabahi Kumari. She is chosen from the Sakya members of Chabahi (Suvarnapurnamahavihara), and is said to have once been worshipped by the Kings of Deopatan. Today her worship is mostly confined to the members of her *baha*.

Bungamati

11. She is chosen from a single patrilineal extended family (*kawa*) of Gubhaju caste whose members are known as Panju, and who share in the important ritual duties associated with their famous god Matsyendranath. She is worshipped by the members of all clean Bungamati castes.

The three most important Kumaris are those who prior to the Gorkha conquest were worshipped by the Malla Kings of the three capital cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaon (i.e., numbers 1, 5 and 7). Through royal patronage they ranked amongst the foremost of popular divinities, and even today they can boast of many possessions, especially jewellery, donated by past monarchs. When the Gorkhas conquered the valley they made Kathmandu their capital, and Patan and Bhadgaon fell into relative obscurity. Though the Patan and Bhadgaon ex-royal Kumaris are still of local importance, they are virtually unknown outside their home cities. By contrast, the Kathmandu royal Kumaris has achieved an even greater eminence, for she has continued to receive the patronage of the new Shaha dynasty. She is now a divinity of national importance, and her

annual chariot festival is a spectacular and colourful occasion attended by huge crowds. The remaining eight non-royal Kumaris, though they each present features of considerable interest, are all of local importance and for reasons of space will have to be ignored in this paper. I will, in fact, confine most of my comments to the principal royal Kumari of Kathmandu.

The history of Kumari worship in Nepal is as yet shrouded in a great deal of legend and mystery. Though there is evidence that a goddess of this name has been worshipped for a very long time, certainly since at least as early as the 6th century A. D. (Hasrat 1970: 41-42 and Wright 1972: 125), no firm statement can be made as to the origin of the custom of worshipping living Kumaris. From various indirect sources it seems possible that it may have begun in the form of small local cults, possibly similar to those still found in the north-east Punjab (Rose 1919 i: 320, 327, 329), shortly after the introduction of Vajrayana Buddhism during the eleventh century A. D. Indeed, one of the local chronicles (Wright:157), *Vamshavali*, records that even at this early date a Patan Kumari was worshipped by a King. Most of the chronicles and oral traditions, however, place the origin of the royal cults in the Malla period, some naming Trailokya Malla, a late sixteenth-century ruler of an undivided kingdom with his capital at Bhadgaon, others Siddhinarasingh, a seventeenth century king of Patan, and yet others Jayaprakasa Malla, the mid-eighteenth century Kathmandu monarch who lost his kingdom to the Gorkhas. (See Hasrat 1970: 59-60; Anderson 1971: 132; Moaven 1975: 169-71).

An important feature of most of these tales is the appearance of Taleju or Tulaja Bhavani as the tutelary divinity of the relevant reigning monarch, a position which she has retained to the present day. Taleju is consistently represented as a beautiful goddess who once maintained an intimate relationship with her worshipping king. Then one day an event occurred which so offended her that she no longer appeared in physical form. In some versions the King himself committed the offence by breaking the rule that he must not see her when he came to visit her; in others the offenders were suspicious female members of his family, either his wife or his daughter. But whatever the version, there is always the implication, which is sometimes made explicit, that the King developed a strong desire to sexually possess the goddess. The following night Taleju appeared to the King in a dream and told him that though she could no longer meet him as before she would give him the opportunity to worship and consult with her by taking the form of a young girl whose family practised a debased or polluting occupation. In most versions the caste named was the Sakya, though in Patan it was the Gubhaju. The selection is of interest

on two counts—though the Mallas were orthodox Hindu Kings and both Taleju and Kumari are unquestionably Hindu deities, the Sakya and Gubhaju are pure Buddhist castes of high repute. They are the sole occupants of the former Buddhist monasteries (*baha* and *bahi*), and even today, some six or seven hundred years after the collapse of monasticism, their boys are jointly initiated in a ceremony in which they become monks for four days. The Gubhaju alone have the right to practise as Buddhist domestic priests, and both in function and in status they are a close replica of the Hindu Brahmins (Greenwold 1974: 101-23). The Sakya, though they may not become household priests, are nevertheless 'pure' Buddhists; indeed, they claim direct descent from the Sakya clan that gave birth to Sakyamuni Buddha. But the traditional occupation of most Sakya and many Gubhaju, that of gold-smithing, involves a number of highly polluting activities in particular the melting of gold in order to separate it from other metals.

The somewhat surprising equation between royal Taleju and Sakya Kumari may reflect a desire on the part of the Malla kings to give their imported lineage deity increased legitimacy through association with the long-established and much revered Kumari. All of the stories portray the king as having lost favour with his protecting deity, a fact which may reflect some weakness in his position. The reappearance of Taleju as Kumari in the form of a young Buddhist girl had the important political result of projecting the source of legitimacy outside the palace. This feature of the cult undoubtedly gained in importance when the Gorkhas conquered the Newars and they too found it desirable to acknowledge the legitimating function of the Sakya Kumari of Kathmandu. Virtually every history textbook in the country recounts how, when Prithwi Narayan Shaha, the conquering Gorkha king, entered Kathmandu during the annual Kumari festival, he first received *prasad* or blessing from the goddess and then decreed that the festival should continue. It is this event that above all else is represented as conferring legitimacy on the new dynasty—a symbolic act of great importance repeated annually during her festival when the King comes to her house to kiss her feet and to receive *tika* from her. The legitimating function of this exchange is evident in the many tales that are told of a change of ruler or even dynasty following some irregularity. For example—in 1955 the goddess, who seemed to be dozing, wrongly placed the *tika* on the forehead of the crown prince rather than the king, Eight months later the king died and his son was crowned (Anderson 1971: 135).

Since each of the principal Kumaris in the three capital cities is still regarded as, amongst other things, a living form of Taleju Bhavani, it is

worth pausing a moment to consider the nature of this goddess. According to the chronicles she was first brought to Kathmandu valley by Harisingh Deva, a fourteenth-century Karnatic prince of Tirhut whose capital was at Simraongadh in what is now part of southern Nepal. The appearance of Harisingh in valley politics was a direct consequence of the collapse of Hindu kingdoms in north India due to the rapid expansion of Moslem power. Though historians are uncertain as to whether Harisingh actually ruled the country from Bhadgaon or simply exercised some kind of influence at court, it seems beyond doubt that it was during this period that Taleju Bhavani was established as the tutelary divinity of Nepalese monarchs. During the fourteenth century there was only one valley kingdom with its capital at Bhadgaon, and it was here that Harisingh reputedly built her temple in the palace compound. It was not until after Yaksha Malla made a tripartite division in the early fifteenth century that additional Taleju temples were built, first in Kathmandu in 1501 A. D. and then in Patan in 1620 A. D. In each of the three cities her temple stands in the old palace compound, and they are still the scene of massive sacrificial rites during Dasain. As I will shortly describe, new royal Kumaris are installed in office in courtyards immediately adjacent to the Taleju temples, and for her Hindu worshippers it is the spirit of this goddess who is invoked to enter the young girls.

Bhavani, which literally means 'giver of existence', is one of the many epithets of Sakti or Devi, the consort of Siva. In those areas, such as the Deccan in central India, where she receives special veneration as an independent deity, her attributes are similar to those normally associated with Durga and Kali. Though Durga is commonly represented as beautiful and calm while Kali is ugly and frenzied, the two are alike in that they are both powerful blood-lusting destroyers of male demons and enemies. The fearsome Kali aspect of Bhavani is that which was most apparent in the notorious Thuggee cult, while that of beautiful protectress was stressed in her appearance as the tutelary divinity of leading Maratha families. By far the most famous of the many Indian Bhavani temples is that of Tuljapur, a small town in Hyderabad. Though an ancient place of pilgrimage, it was not until the Bhosle family began to worship her in the late sixteenth century that she acquired widespread fame. Sivaji, the most famous of the Maratha rulers regularly consulted with Taleju Bhavani prior to undertaking any important action, and in 1658 A. D. he built a new and most impressive temple for her at Pratapgad. As in Nepal, the goddess is represented as the main source of the ruler's strength and wisdom (Kincaid and Parasnis 1918: 113-15, 152, 158-59, 210-11 and 53-78).

The Kumari-Taleju equation is spelt out most vividly in two contexts:

at the installation ceremony for new royal Kumaris, and during the annual sacrifice of hundreds of buffaloes and goats to Taleju during Dasain. The two are closely linked for the installation ceremony must take place immediately after the mass animal sacrifice.

SELECTION AND INSTALLATION

The selection of the new royal Kumari is a complex affair controlled by a formal committee of eight ritual specialists.⁷ Those eligible to be chosen are the daughters of all male Sakya who have membership of one of the 15 main ex-monasteries of Kathmandu. About a month prior to Dasain the candidates are examined by the selection committee in a room in Hanuman Dhoka, the old Malla palace. I understand that despite the high prestige and continuing popularity of the position, only about four or five girls reach this stage. The difficult selection criteria are widely known and only those obviously well qualified are submitted. The formal task of the committee is to find a girl who exhibits all the 32 perfections⁸ expected of a female deity.

Some of these, for example, forty teeth (i.e., the lost milk teeth plus the full adult set), a chest like a lion's, thighs like a deer's and a body like a

⁷The committee consists of the Bada Guraju (the chief Brahmin of the country who holds a palace appointment as the king's adviser on religious matters), the Achahju priest of Taleju temple, the Royal astrologer and the Pancha Buddha. The Pancha Buddha are five Newar Buddhist priests of Vajracharya caste who also officiate during the annual Kumari festival and have various other ceremonial duties in connection with the Goddess. They consist of two Raj Gubhajas, one from Sikhamu Baha and the other from Savai Baha and three other Gubhajas of Sikhamu. The Raj Gubhajas hold hereditary positions that date back to the Malla period, when they carried the authority of the king to settle disputes amongst the Newar Buddhists.

⁸The following list was given to me by a Vajracharya informant:

(1) Feet well-proportioned. (2) Spiralling lines on the soles of the feet. (3) Nails well-proportioned. (4) Long and well-formed toes. (5) Feet and hands like those of a duck (with netlike lines). (6) Feet and hands soft and firm. (7) The body broad at the shoulders and narrow at the waist. (8) Thighs like those of a deer. (9) Small and well-recessed sexual organs. (10) Chest like that of a lion. (11) Well-spread shoulders. (12) Long arms. (13) Pure body. (14) Neck like a conch shell. (15) Cheeks like those of a lion. (16) Forty teeth (the first eight milk teeth and 32 second teeth). (17) Teeth white and nicely shaped. (18) No gaps between teeth. (19) Tongue small and sensitive. (20) Tongue moist. (21) Voice clear and soft like a duck's. (22) Eyes blue/black. (23) Eyelashes like those of a cow. (24) A beautiful complexion with white lustre. (25) A gold-coloured complexion. (26) Skin pores small and not too open. (27) Hair-whorls stiff and turning to the right. (28) Hair black. (29) Forehead large and well-proportioned. (30) Head round with cone-shaped top. (31) Body shaped like a banyan tree. (32) Robust body.

banyan tree are not features one might expect to find in a three- or four-years-old. In fact, a much shorter and simpler list is used in which the keynote is youthful purity. The first concern is that the child should be in perfect health and have avoided any serious illness, especially smallpox. Great stress is placed on skin with a good lustre and no blemish or scar, oval face with large black eyes and long lashes, nicely proportioned limbs, toes and fingers, no bad body smells and above all that she should have lost no teeth and be pre-menstrual. Some also say that she should be fully weaned and have learned how to talk—no doubt practical considerations in view of her immanent separation from her mother. In addition to the physical signs the committee is supposed to consider her personality—especially that she should show a fearless and calm disposition. They also carefully consider her family's genealogical background and general reputation in order to be certain that she is of unblemished Sakya stock. A final and most important consideration is her horoscope—it must be examined not only in terms of her own auspiciousness, but also in order to ascertain that it does not in any way conflict with that of the King. This is to guarantee that he will not place himself in jeopardy when he comes to worship her during her festival.

The selected girl returns to her home where she stays until the final tests and rites of installation are performed. During this period the spirit of Kumari is believed to be already slowly entering into her so that if she should be in any way unsuitable then her body is certain to react negatively.

Dasain is a ten day long festival on the first nine of which the *Nava Durga*, the nine separate forms of this powerful mother goddess, are worshipped at their various local shrines. On *maha astami*, the 'great eighth' day of Dasain, the slaying of the arch demon Mahisasura by Durga is celebrated throughout the country by the sacrifice of thousands of buffaloes, goats, sheep, chickens and ducks. It is most especially in Mulchowk, a small inner courtyard in Hanuman Dhoka that leads to the adjacent Taleju temple, that Durga's triumph is re-enacted. At nightfall eight buffaloes representing the demon are killed by having their throats slit so that the blood jets high towards the shrine that contains the Taleju icon. A few hours later at about midnight a further 54 buffaloes and 54 goats are killed in a similar manner. As may well be imagined, the small courtyard is by then awash with blood. Some of the heads are placed in and around the Taleju shrine and the entrance is turned into a truly gory sight with dripping blood, hanging entrails and nailed up skulls with attached horns. The remaining heads, with lighted wicks placed between the horns, are set out in rows across the courtyard. At this point, usually about 1.00 A. M. the small Kumari-elect is brought to the entrance. She is

supposed to walk by herself, in a clockwise direction around the raised edge until she reaches the bloody Taleju shrine. She must enter it, still maintaining a perfectly calm demeanour, and if all is well she is then taken upstairs to a small room for the installation ceremony. The officiating low-caste Acahju priests of Taleju maintain a strict rule of secrecy regarding subsequent events. There are, however, good reasons to believe that they must be similar to those that occur at the installation of a Patan Kumari. If so, then after the usual purificatory and other preliminary rites, the chief priest performs the main ceremony in which he removes from the girl's body all of her previous life's experience so that the spirit of Taleju may enter a perfectly pure being. The girl sits naked in front of the priest while he purifies each of her sensitive body areas in turn by reciting a mantra and by touching each area with a small bundle of such pure things as grass, tree bark and leaves. The six sensitive parts are her eyes, throat, breasts, navel, vagina and vulva. As he removes the impurities the girl is said to steadily become redder and redder as the spirit of the goddess enters into her.

At this stage the girl is dressed and made up with Kumari hairstyle, red *tika*, third eye, jewellery, etc., and then sits on her beautifully carved wooden throne on the seat of which the priest has painted the powerful *sri yantra mandala* of Taleju. She also holds the sword of Taleju and it is at this point that the final and complete transformation takes place. It is worth noting that though from now until her disqualification some years later she will be continuously regarded as Kumari, it is also believed that it is only when fully made up and sitting on her throne that identification is complete. At other times, especially when casually playing with friends, she is partly herself and partly Kumari.

From the Hindu point of view the rituals performed in Mulchowk complete the installation of Kumari, but for the Newar Buddhists, and it should be remembered that they constitute the majority of her worshippers, the serious part of proceedings has yet to come. Though they do not dispute the belief that Kumari is a virginal form of Taleju, she is for them more importantly identified with Vajradevi, the chief female divinity of Vajrayana Buddhism. After she returns to Kumari house from Mulchowk she is taken to the shrine on the second floor where two leading Gubhaju priests worship her as Vajradevi, the sexual partner of Cakra-samvara, a fearsome many-armed deity who also figures prominently in Tibetan Buddhism.

I would at this point like to stress the marked contrast between the initial selection procedures in which the aim was to find a pure young virgin, one who above all else had not yet bled in any kind of way, and the

installation rites in which the scene itself is one of extreme goriness and the goddesses invoked to possess the girl are both erotic and bloodthirsty.

DISQUALIFICATION

After the installation ceremony the girl remains as Kumari until she shows some clear sign that she is human rather than divine. The most certain indication is loss of blood, which may be provoked by loss of tooth, first menstruation, a wound, or internal haemorrhage. Serious illness, especially if, like smallpox, it results in body scarring, also causes disqualification. Girls mostly remain in office about six or seven years, the first menstruation being the most common disqualification. This clearly indicates that loss of tooth is not by itself taken too seriously. One ex-Kumari whom I interviewed, a fifty-six year old woman who has been in office for ten years from the age of four to fourteen, told me that in her case no negative sign had appeared and that she was falsely disqualified on the grounds of suspected menstruation. When I asked her about her teeth she admitted that she had lost most of her first ones, but that this had been considered acceptable because the new teeth had already broken through and were clearly visible. Her milk teeth, she explained, simply fell with neither loss of blood nor unseemly gap.

I found evidence that despite the apparent strictness with which disqualifying signs are supposed to be observed, when, as occasionally happens, incumbents remain in office until well past puberty, this is regarded with at least as much awesome veneration as critical comment. The current Patan Kumari, who is the second most important in the country, is an outstanding example. She became Kumari when four and is now reputedly twenty-two. Most agree that she must not only have lost her first teeth, but also have had her first menstruation many years ago. Cynics, of whom there are certainly quite a few, assume that she remains in office simply because there are no willing successors. This could well be so for though she has great prestige in Patan, she has no national following and there is small material reward for the difficult life. Others, however, take great pride in such a remarkable Kumari and attribute to her unusual powers. For example, she is said to be able to drink six glasses of pure alcoholic spirit without adverse effect. Some even favour the theory that no disqualifying sign has appeared.

LIFESTYLE AND WORSHIP

The Kathmandu royal Kumari must, for as long as she remains in office,

live apart from her family in a most imposing official residence located next to the old Malla palace. It is built in the style of one of the Buddhist ex-monasteries and with only one important exception—its resident deities and other sacra are Buddhist. The main downstairs shrine contains the Pancha (i.e., five) or Dhyani Buddha, the first floor shrine the Tantric couple Vajradevi and Cakrasamvara, and in the courtyard there are a number of specifically Buddhist structures. The interesting exception is the presence of numerous wood carvings of Durga killing a demon on the tympanums over the courtyard doors—an unequivocal declaration to visitors that the resident deity is the powerful Hindu goddess.

Kumari must remain in this building other than on those few occasions when she goes out to attend certain public festivals. She is looked after by a caretaker family of Gubhaju caste which currently consists of an old widow, her four married sons and their wives and 32 grandchildren. They share the daily tasks of washing, dressing, feeding and entertaining the young goddess. In theory she is wholly autonomous if she wishes to have certain playmates they must be found; if they annoy her they should be removed or punished; if she does not wish to be worshipped in a certain way or perhaps even not worshipped at all then her devotees must act in accordance with her wishes. In practice, if she should begin to act in an excessively capricious or disruptive manner someone would undoubtedly move to have her dismissed on the grounds of ungodlike behaviour.

Kumari must always wear red clothes, have her hair drawn up on the top of her head in the distinctive Kumari style, have a third eye on her forehead, and wear a pair of gold bracelets. But on formal occasions, especially for her annual chariot festival, her appearance is truly grand. In addition to an impressive quantity of jewellery donated both by kings and by wealthy private admirers, she wears brilliant scarlet clothes, has a huge red *tika* on her forehead and striking black eye make-up. It is worth noting that the formal title of a princess (daughter of a King, both before and after marriage) is Adhiraj Kumari—Adhiraj simply meaning 'King'.

Each morning, after she has been washed and dressed, she is taken to her throne where she is worshipped by the Hindu priest of the Taleju temple. Later, during the day, members of the public come to worship her. She makes frequent appearances at a window for groups of tourists in the courtyard, has long play sessions with the grandchildren of her caretaker, and is given some formal tuition in school subjects from a private tutor. On an average day about ten to twenty people come to worship her. There are no formal requirements: some come with a simple bowl of offerings, usually sweets and flowers, in the normal manner of worshipping a temple deity; some make more elaborate offerings of cooked food, cloth and

money, and perhaps recite a few texts; others bring their family priest to conduct a major ceremony. Devotees come from a very wide range of Nepalese society, include both Hindus and Buddhists and range from simple peasants to prominent government officials. Though most are Newar, many members of other ethnic groups also visit her. The only persons not permitted to approach her are untouchables and foreigners.

Foremost amongst her worshippers are those who suffer from bleeding problems: women with menstrual difficulties, those with chronic haemorrhage, or who habitually cough blood. A second category consists of those who have recently participated in a ceremony in which it is regarded as desirable to conclude with *kumaripuja*. Though this is true of virtually all ritual occasions, for without *kumaripuja* all that went before would be rendered powerless or futile, only a very few of the participants actually worship a living Kumari—most simply perform the *puja* to some icon or image whichever is most convenient. Occasionally, public servants and even government ministers, especially those who are in fear either of loss of job or demotion, are to be found amongst those who come to make offerings to the royal Kumari. A further category consists of those who believe that she has the power to foretell future events; especially whether or not a client's proposed action is likely to prosper. In each of the above contexts she is specifically worshipped as Kumari and hence the emphasis is primarily, though even here not without some ambiguity, on her overt role as pure young virgin. Quite the opposite holds for those who invite a living Kumari to attend either Hindu or Buddhist privately-organized Tantric rituals. On such occasions the young girl is used as a suitable vessel or container for the spirit of some other goddess, usually mature, beautiful and passionate. In Hindu Tantric rituals such goddesses are most commonly one of the forms of Sakti or Devi, while in Vajrayana rituals they are most likely to be one of the red and naked Yoginis or Dakinis, in particular Vajradevi. In such rites it is the full power of Kumari's delayed sexual and creative potential that is especially venerated. Though physically a pure young virgin, she is nevertheless charged with the power of erotic womanhood.

When a Kathmandu royal Kumari has been declared unfit for office, she is expected to return to family life as an ordinary girl. After proceeding through the usual life-cycle rituals such as the twelve-day isolation for first menstruation, she is expected to advance to the rituals and exchanges that culminate in marriage. But inevitably there are difficulties both for others to accept her as an ordinary human and for her to adjust to the radically new role required of her. For a considerable number of formative years she has been treated as a powerful goddess and worshipped by everyone,

even the King. She has come to expect that every whim will be satisfied—such as the desire for a new toy, the summoning of playmates or the removal of those who offend. It is important too that she has come to expect that all those who visit her will bear offerings of some kind or other, no matter how humble. Clearly, a prolonged period of this kind does not constitute the ideal socialization for a future Newar wife. Although the position of Newar women, whether as mothers, wives or sisters, is distinctly better than that of most neighbouring Himalayan or north Indian women, it is still quite emphatically one in which service and obedience, especially to husbands, is the keynote. Almost immediately the haughty young goddess must suffer the indignity of menstrual isolation. Then as soon as she marries, she must enter that most difficult phase as the young girl who should serve and even worship her husband. Instead of having the King bow annually to her feet, she must now do so daily to her husband's.

It is small wonder that there is a widespread belief that marriage to an ex-royal Kumari will prove disastrous for any but the strongest of men. In addition to a personality that is likely to differ markedly from that expected of the ideal humble wife, there is a strong belief that such girls retain something of their former power. That this is so is evident in that all ex-Kumaris are addressed for the rest of their lives as *dyo meiju*—or 'deity female'. Some say that this continuing power is so strong that it may even kill a weak husband, and hence early widowhood is thought to be a common fate. Another common stereotype is that some ex-Kumaris have been obliged to marry men of lower caste than themselves. In actual fact, five of the last ten Kumaris have married men of their own caste, and thus far seem to have adjusted to their new status. Only two remained as spinsters until old age, while the two most recent are also single but thought not likely to remain so for long. The remaining ex-Kumari, who is now a woman of 56, has so far lived a life that gives some substance to the popular image. She reigned as Kumari for ten years from the age of four to fourteen, and though she eventually married a Sakya man, it was not until she was about 25. After five years, during which she had two daughters, the husband died of some mysterious disease, possibly cancer. She then lived for almost ten years as a widow, and by all accounts caused many raised eyebrows by running a grog shop in the centre of town. She dressed very gaily during this period and whether true or not was suspected of having many lovers. She finally married a man of merchant Shrestha caste, one rung lower than the Sakya but still both clean and respectable. She is still married to him, but has had no more children. When I interviewed her I was impressed by her forceful personality. She

herself readily agrees that ex-Kumaris have great difficulty in adjusting to the life of an ordinary woman. Indeed, when she was approached some thirty years ago over the possibility of offering one of her own daughters for selection as Kumari she flatly refused, and just recently has discouraged the candidacy of her granddaughter.

THE AMBIGUOUS AND DANGEROUS VIRGIN

From the data thus far presented it is evident that there is a recurrent theme of dangerous sexuality associated with this overtly virginal and pure young goddess. According to her Hindu worshippers she is really Taleju Bhavani, a mysterious though immensely powerful goddess who destroys male demons and arouses the lust of kings. For her Buddhist worshippers she is Vajradevi, the beautiful blood-drinking sexual consort of Cakra-sambara. Indeed, the term Kumari itself contains something of the goddess' central ambiguity for though it is most commonly understood to refer to a virgin girl in the sense of one as yet undefiled either by menstruation or by sexual intercourse, it also appears in many lists of terms for young girls as applying to the immediate post-menstrual stage. Walker (1968: 434), for example, provides a list in which Kumari is used to refer to a thirteen-year-old girl whose menses had begun two years earlier, while in most Tantric texts a sixteen-year-old girl is deemed most suitable for *kumaripuja*. Though the Newars formally insist on the pre-menstrual purity of their living Kumaris, they nevertheless display some ambivalence through their barely concealed admiration of such mature Kumaris as the present Patan incumbent.

My argument is not, however, simply that the popularity of Kumari worship can be understood by reference to her dual nature as pure young virgin and erotic woman. The key is rather to be found in the ambiguous evaluation of virginity itself. The virgin girl, though highly rated for her natural purity, is nevertheless a threat to men and to male sexuality. As Walker has made clear, the basis for the male belief in the power of the virgin lies in the fear of pollution through contact with hymenal blood. Yet in Nepal, as throughout the Hindu world, blood is not only feared and avoided as a polluting substance, but venerated and embraced as a source of life. Both aspects of blood symbolism are of importance in interpreting the meaning of certain aspects of the Kumari cult.

The first and most obvious point is that Kumari as a young pre-menstrual girl is classed as a 'pure' goddess who must be kept free from any polluting contact with blood. That this is so is evident not only in the criteria of fitness for office, most of which focus on her personal freedom

from any form of bleeding, but also in the prohibitions against either contact with menstruating women or the sacrifice of animals in her name. But there are other contexts that indicate a more positive identification with blood and its properties. For example, though she herself must not bleed she has the important ability to halt the flow in others when it threatens their well-being. It should also be noted that Kumari is classed as a red-coloured deity; in her installation ceremony she becomes redder and redder as the spirit of Taleju enters her, and she must subsequently wear red, scarlet, pink or purple clothes. Her favourite flower is the red hibiscus, she must wear a huge red *tika* on her forehead, and her toes are purified with red paint. But her ambiguous relationship with blood is perhaps best seen in the context of animal sacrifice. Though no sacrifice may be made direct to Kumari she is nevertheless possessed by the spirit of the blood-lusting Taleju. On her installation night she is surrounded by the bloody heads and entrails of the animals sacrificed to Taleju, and throughout her tenure of office she must annually revisit this gory scene in Mulchowk.

The importance of blood symbolism¹ is by no means confined to the Kumari cult. This is apparent not only in the massive animal sacrifices that take place annually at Dasain, but also in the manner in which the animals are killed. Unlike all neighbouring peoples in the Himalayas, who remove their victims' heads with a single blow of a curved knife, the Newars kill their animals as slowly as possible by holding the neck back and giving the jugular vein a tiny nick. The aim is to ensure that a hot jet of blood can be so directed into the mouth of the deity that it can be drunk direct from a still living animal. The victim is then beheaded and the body dragged around the temple courtyard leaving a bloody trail behind it.

The negative or polluting attributes of blood are most apparent in the beliefs and associated rituals concerning menstruation. All Newar girls of clean caste are required to undergo a ceremony called *barha* prior to marriage. The *barha* may be performed either as a group ritual (*barha taye-gu*) in which several girls jointly participate prior to their first menstruation, or as an individual *rite de passage* held when the girl has her first menses. In both types of ceremony the girl is confined for eleven days in a dark room in her family home. Special care is taken to ensure that the sun does not enter and on the twelfth day when she emerges she is brought blindfolded to a place in full view of the sun where she offers it flowers and rice. The blindfold is then removed and she looks at the sun. It should be remembered that the sun, Surya, is a male god and that it is he, together with all of the men of her household, who are protected by the *barha* ritual from the dangers of the girl's menstrual blood. Greenwold (1974: 119)

recently recorded the following most interesting statement made by a Vajracharya informant:

A girl during her first menstrual period releases some poisons from her womb. If this is exposed to the sun, the sun itself would become impure. If this poison is exposed to her male kinsmen, her brothers or her father and uncles, they would become impure and also might suffer many misfortunes. . . . In the same way the Pore and Chyami (two Newar sweeper castes of unclean status) are full of poison and are unclean and polluted.

The threatening power of a girl undergoing her seclusion is dramatically represented in the figure of the *barha khya*, a cotton effigy of a part-deity part-spirit which is believed to possess the girl and is hung on the wall of the seclusion room. The *khy*a is a close bodyguard of Laksmi, the goddess of wealth and is commonly represented as a dwarfed and pudgy figure who is black in colour with curly hair and red-pouting lips. Some say that he actually possesses the girl and is therefore a grave danger to her well-being during the period of seclusion; others are of the opinion that he provides her with companionship and amusement, possibly of a sexual kind. Either way, he is essential for the success of the ritual and each day he must be offered food.

An unusual feature of Newar menstrual taboos is that they are almost wholly confined to the first menses. Most orthodox Hindus, including the Parbatia Brahmin and Chetri peoples of Kathmandu valley, require the isolation of women throughout each bleeding period. It is not until after a purifying bath on the fourth day that Parbatia women can cook food and they must wait a day further before attending to religious duties. Amongst the Newars, by contrast, the only restriction placed on a menstruating woman is that she must have a bath before cooking and she should keep away from the household shrines. Though it is likely that most men refrain from sexual intercourse there is no formal taboo and little or no sense of danger. In other words, for the Newars the dangerous and polluting power associated with menstrual blood is almost wholly confined to its initial occurrence in virgin girls. The purifying effect of the *barha tayagu* is so efficacious that men need have little to fear from all future menses.

The Newar men do not, however, rely solely on this ritual to make their women into safe sexual partners. Like the Nayars, they require all girls of clean caste to undergo a mock-marriage with a non-mortal spouse. The *ih*i is an elaborate two-day ceremony during which some 20 to 30 premenstrual girls are symbolically married to a *bel* fruit, a bitter quince

that is throughout the Hindu world especially associated with Siva. There is no indigenous explanation for this remarkable ceremony other than to stress its necessity both for the good of the girl herself and the safety of her future husband. It is regarded as the girl's true marriage and hence enables her to obtain a divorce and to remarry as a widow whilst remaining eternally married to a divine spouse. As amongst the Nayars, and most probably wherever analogous mock-marriages are performed in India, girls enter into their secondary 'real' marriages at a post-menstrual stage. The average age for Newar girls at marriage is sixteen (Nepali, 201-3) and there is good reason to believe that this is not just a modern development. Furthermore, in both societies the *de facto* secondary unions are not the eternal and indissoluble bonds that they are amongst orthodox Hindus. Just as the *barha* first menstruation ceremony appears to have obviated the need for any subsequent menstrual precautions of a significant kind, so too has the *ihi* ceremony freed Newar men and women from the normal restrictions of an orthodox Hindu marriage.

Like both Gough (1955) and Yalman (1963) I am arguing that the combined effect of the two ceremonies is to negate the powerful ritual dangers associated with pre-menstrual virgins. Whereas Gough contended that the danger arises through the identification of virgin girl with incestuously desired and castrating mother, I side rather with Yalman in attributing it to the polluting attributes of the pubescent girl's approaching sexual maturity. Gough supported her argument by noting that the chief Nayar deity, Bhagavati, is both 'mother' and 'virgin'. Even though the Newar Taleju is a form of Durga or Kali and hence closely related to Bhagavati, there is little that I can see of the truly maternal in any of these goddesses —Bhagavati included. On the contrary, they are all normally depicted as beautiful young women of a sexually desirable kind. In other words, the danger that enters the young virgin at the Kumari installation rite and is finally removed at the *barha* ceremony is essentially the danger of sexual maturity in an unmarried girl. That such a danger should take a highly developed form in a caste-structured society is, as Yalman has persuasively argued, a logical consequence of hierarchy based on notions of relative purity.

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